

St Albans Abbey, Ash Wednesday Sermon 2016

The Revd Canon Dr Tim Bull

I must confess to finding Lent a bit of problem which is probably *not* a very good thing to admit – especially when you’ve been invited to preach at the Cathedral on Ash Wednesday.

The problem isn’t Lent itself it’s all this giving things up – biscuits – chocolate – alcohol.

It’s not that I’d find going without *difficult* – it’s just that Lent is supposed to be a *spiritual* discipline – an opportunity to draw closer to God in preparation for Holy Week and Easter and giving up alcohol doesn’t seem to bring *me* any closer to *God*.

Of course there are *advantages* of trying to eat and drink more healthily – of taking more exercise – of quitting smoking – and all the other things we attempt for this season of forty-something days.

But I’m left wondering – what exactly they’ve got to do with *God*.

So this Lent, I’m going to try something a bit different something you might like to try with me.

It all started when I heard a talk I heard about *human perception* – the way we see, and hear, and sense things – or rather *don’t* see – *don’t* hear – *don’t* sense them.

I’ll give you an example.

When we moved to St Albans, whenever I came home, I’d get an awful lot of pleasure from our nice, blue, solid front door. The front door on our old house was really tacky and cheap. But this one is a proper, traditional – one might call it a real *St Albans* – front door – and so I would admire it for a moment or two as I came home.

The thing is – though – that as time’s gone by I’ve stopped noticing it. I come in and go out without giving the door much of a second thought. I don’t even take in the particularly lovely shade of paint.

And it’s the same with everything.

What we *used* to notice – soon fades into the background whether that’s a sight – a sound – a smell.

It doesn’t take long before I stop noticing the new picture hanging on the wall – or the aroma of the scented candle.

Even a loud – irritating – ticking clock stops annoying me if I live with it long enough.

And my guess is it’s the same with our faith – the same with *God*.

We can become so used to simply “being Christians” that we no longer notice we even *are*.

We can become so used to God’s presence with us – in us – around us that God vanishes into the scenery.

But the traditional Lenten disciplines of prayer and fasting are intended to *change* that.

Prayer – is an opportunity to give God some focused attention – to look again at God in a conscious, deliberate, intentional way. Our physical eyes may be closed. But our spiritual eyes are wide open.

Fasting – giving things up – is an opportunity to clear out of the way all those things that distract us – get in the way – so that we can direct our gaze attentively – thoughtfully – towards the divine.

So this Lent instead of giving up biscuits I'm going to endeavour to look deliberately – carefully towards God.

And as I do – I imagine myself having a kind of conversation.



My Lord, where are You?

Where can I find You?

How can I see You?

For You are the One:

whose co-ordinates cannot be ascertained by careful scientific experiment,
whose location cannot be pinned down by systematic theological enquiry,
whose whereabouts cannot be described - let alone prescribed by human will.

And yet You can be found:

in the misty dawn and in the violent wind,
in the summer sunshine and in the nourishing rain,
in the magnificent sunset and in the moonlit night.

In the loving friendship of family, and in the faces of strangers,

You are there.

In the hurrying bustle of shoppers, and in the kneeling reverence of a pilgrim,

You are there.

In the rewarding productiveness of work, and in the well-earned rest of retirement,

You are there.

You are there in all the everyday familiarity of our world and of our human lives.

But You are there, also, in the exotic and the strange – the unfamiliar and the unknown.

In the anthropic fine-tuning of fundamental physical constants

— God.

In the subatomic building blocks of quark, lepton, hadron and boson

— God.

In the life-sustaining chemical reactions of organic molecules

— God.

In the cold silent outer reaches of our solar system

— God.

In the unequalled cataclysmic violence of an exploding supernova

— God.

In the unimaginable emptiness of intergalactic space

to the inconceivable density of a black hole

— God.

God in the familiar.

God in the strange.

God who is seen.

God who is hidden.

God who is everywhere – and who is *in* everything.

Yet You are the Lord who freely chose to become *visible* – to be seen

in one single way

in one single place

in one single time

in one single man

nailed to one single cross.

For He is the image of the invisible God the firstborn over all creation -

and His is the kingdom,

and the power

and the glory,

for ever and ever. Amen.